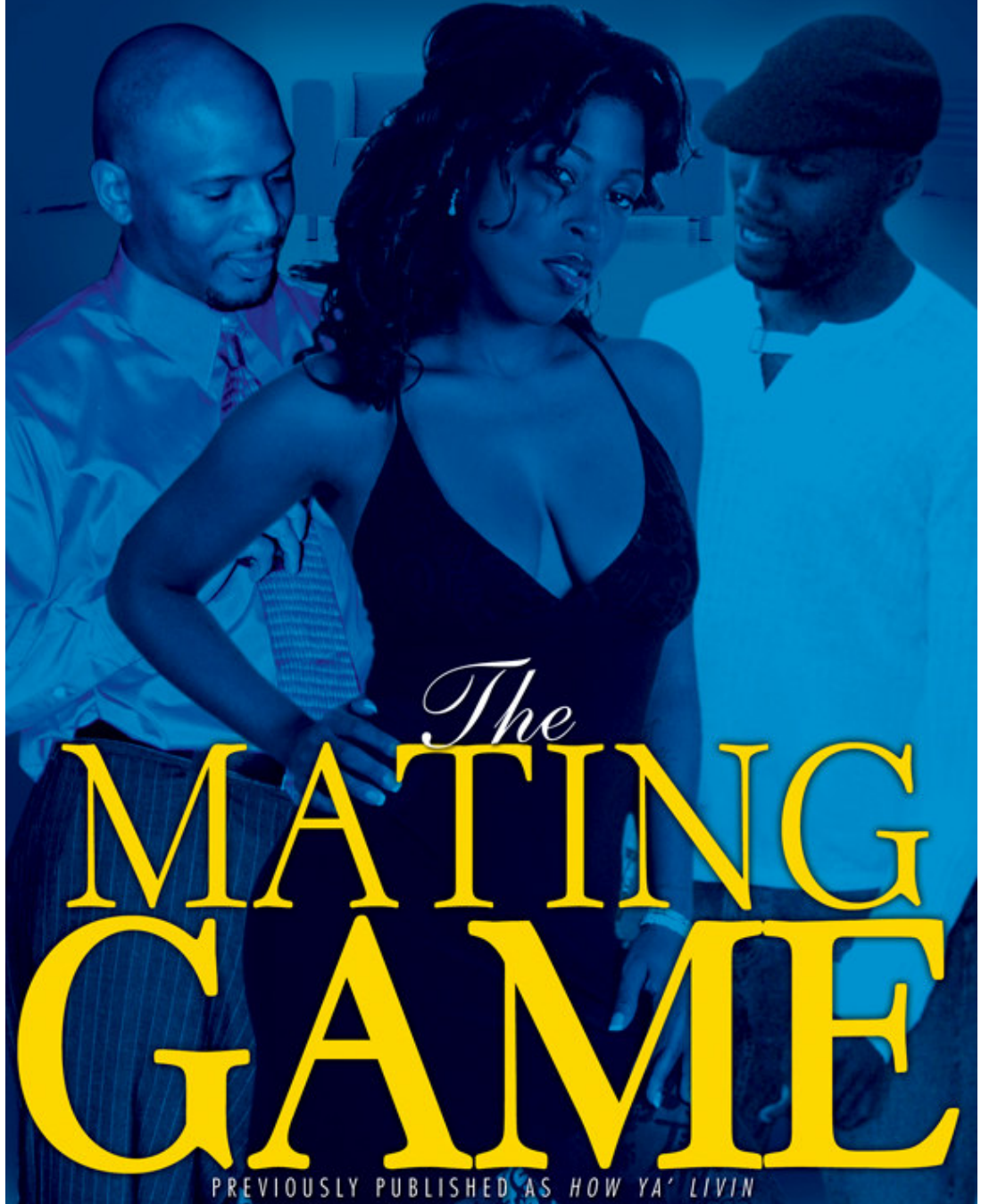


ZANE PRESENTS  
**JONATHAN LUCKETT**  
AUTHOR OF *JASMINIUM*, *FEEDING FRENZY* AND *DISSOLVE*



PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED AS *HOW YA' LIVIN'*

An excerpt from the novel

# The Mating Game

by

Jonathan Lockett

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IT IS AMAZING what the smell of good coffee will do for some people. For Vince, a good cup of coffee was worth the trip across town any day. He knew all of the good coffee shops within a twenty-mile radius by heart. And he made sure part of his daily ritual included stops at the various coffee establishments—sometimes only for a minute or two to sip at a cup in between tasks—other times, for longer periods of time, perhaps an hour or more, where he would take a legal pad or his laptop, prop up his feet on a chair or on one of the comfortable couches and get a solid amount of work or creative energy expended, all the while the scent of ground coffee permeating the air.

He took the Fat Boy across the Memorial Bridge, which was relatively quiet this time of morning, down Constitution Avenue past the State Department, Fed, White House, and museums, then across Seventh Street to Independence Avenue. He loved riding through D.C. on his bike—the feeling of the open air and wind against his dark skin as he rode—something he found hard to describe. In a vehicle, one felt contained—protected—cut off—in a sense, from the road and what was occurring there and beyond its boundaries. But on a bike, you were immersed in the totality of the road and the elements—the smells, rolls of the earth, and its vivid colors—all of this, the very essence of life that jutted right up to the asphalt, suddenly attacking all five of your senses—the wind and sun on your face and skin as you rode, the vibrant colors not filtered by a windshield, doors, or windows, sounds not dampened, scents and odors, raw and uncut. Riding through D.C., Vince experienced people in their natural element as he roared by, catching them, photograph-like, stuck in mid-stride, mouth hung open, a dribble of syllables trickling out, as he leaned into a turn and passed them. Dogs being walked by owners, sniffing the air and barking as he moved swiftly past. Up Independence, beyond the various government buildings, the Capitol on his left as he increased throttle to maintain speed up the hill, loving the Boy as it hummed and groaned beneath him, the Vance & Hines singing their rumbling bass tune in the morning air.

Into Capital Hill and near the various restaurants and bars like the well-known *Hawk and Dove* that catered to Hill staffers, and finally to the place which he frequented several times a week. The *Cosi* coffee and bar stood on the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and Third Street, S.E., a two-story building with a bunch of tables and chairs that were arranged around the entrance. Vince pulled to the curb and cut the engine. Several patrons glanced up from their Sunday paper—Washington Post or Times, as he climbed off and strolled in. *Cosi* was one of those places, especially this *Cosi*—hard to describe—but you knew it when you waltzed in—it was the airy, down home, comfortable feeling. Call it atmosphere, or what have you, but it was something about the colors—warm earth tones—tall ceilings, eclectic art, which hung on brick walls, small tables and oversized couches, and heavenly smells that kept Vince coming back. He strolled up to the counter, helmet and gloves in hand and smiled at the black girl behind it.

“Hey, beautiful, how goes it the fine, fine morning,” Vince asked, placing his helmet, a black half shell littered with dozens of stickers—some nasty, but mostly just funny—a thing with bikers—hard to explain—on the counter.

“I’m fine—kind of tired—hung out last night with my girls until real late,” she replied, moving a strand of hair from her eyes. “I knew I shouldn’t have, but damn, there were some hotties up in that joint!”

“Yeah, where was this?” Vince was pulling out his money from his jeans, and she was ringing him up, all without either of them uttering a single word concerning his order—they both had done this many times before.

“This new club up New York Avenue called *Dream*. You should see it, Vince, I swear to God, this place is so awesome!” Her face lit up as she genuflected and spoke. “I mean,

check this—this place has like, three levels, this huge dance floor, and two or three VIP sections—I can't remember which!" Vince grabbed his cup of coffee from a dark skinned brutha with dreads who he merely nodded to behind the counter.

"Yeah? Haven't heard of *Dream*."

"Oh my Goodness—you need to check this place out. Vince, I swear! It is soooo nice. Wood and nice shit everywhere—I mean, this brutha, Mark Barnes, the owner, same guy who did *Republic Gardens*, put it down! Spared no expense. Everyone was up in that spot last night. All kinds of Ballers! I've never seen so many fancy rides in my entire life!"

"Really, Lisa?" Vince sipped at his coffee but made no move to leave.

"It's okay, go drink your coffee in peace. I'll holla at you later." The young girl shooed him away. He grinned at her, placed the change in a tip jar on the counter and headed for the couches in the back by the small bar.

There were only a few others in the bar this time of morning. He nodded to a white couple as he passed by, found a comfortable couch that faced the front counter. He planted himself in it, placing his things on the low coffee table in front. Vince sipped his cup, flipped through the paper that lay splayed on the table. Nothing much of interest caught his eye. He used this time to kind of decompress and chill—to just think—Vince was a cerebral kind of guy, his mind was always ticking, things coming and going, information cataloged, stored away for later reuse—calculations and processing being conducted in the background, even during conversation. Vince noticed everything about someone—their dress, hair style, the fact that one eyebrow had been plucked a bit more than the other—the way a shirt hung just a bit too much over a waist. His eyes took in his surroundings, his mind trying to block the inevitable out of his brain, but it was hard—Maxi was there, just below the surface, and if he wasn't concentrating, or let his guard down for a second, she came bubbling up to the surface. He let thoughts of her and last night invade his psyche, there was a part of him that missed her already, wondered if he was doing/feeling the right things—but then he shook his head—No, he was not going to do this to himself—he knew what he was doing and feeling was indeed correct. And so, he pushed Maxi and their short-lived relationship back down, below the waves, and concentrated on the present, the here and now.

Vince got comfortable, took off his leather jacket and leaned back. Then decided to run to the bike and grab his artist pad from his saddlebags. He always carried around a pen and pad of some sort—there was just too many things swirling around in his head that he needed to jot down. And on mornings like this—Sundays, when there were few people up and about to bother or interrupt his thoughts, he worked best—whether composing his thoughts for an upcoming talk, or just sketching out some ideas for an upcoming art project.

He returned to his favorite couch, took a swig of coffee, leaned his head back, and stared at the ceiling. The piece he was working on at his studio required finishing. Vince was a sculptor of sorts—he took casts of people's faces, arms, or legs, made plaster castings and then painted over them. He had stumbled into this by accident years ago—he has always been creative and loved to spend hours as a kid in his parent's garage creating art from things most people threw away. He had come up with some pretty creative pieces and his parents encouraged him to take art classes and hone his skills. So he did—first drawing classes, then on to pottery, which really didn't hold his fancy, although he did enjoy the feeling of working with clay and other malleable material. Then, almost by accident, he came across a plaster of Paris cast of a person's face—it was lying around in a bin at his art school class—his teacher told him he could have it. Vince took it home, stared at it for hours—the contours, bas-relief in each square inch of tissue—and then he had pulled out his paint set, grabbed a brush, and used his oil-based set to paint alternating swaths of color diagonally across the cast. When he was done he had a vibrant, colorful mask—something that came right out of

an African tribal headgear—his teacher, parents, and friends loved it—his dad had had it mounted and framed; it still hung in the foyer of his parent’s home today, a reminder to all of their son’s creativity.

Over the years Vince had experimented more and more, pushing the envelope, not content to stay within the confines of “normal” art. What was normal anyway? The whole idea of being creative, the essence of why he did what he did—was to create things out of random nonsensical things—order out of non-order, and make them beautiful. And so, Vince discovered his passion—spending time in his studio huddled over castings of strangers or acquaintances he knew—adding touches of paint and shadow to create something unique—a mask that told a story.

When he had first met Maxi a month ago, he had wanted to do a casting of her. She had agreed—reluctantly, at first, until he brought her to his studio and showed her his work. The process, while not painful at all, was messy, and required that a gel-like substance be applied to the subject’s face and neck. You then waited for it to harden, and then it was pulled carefully off. Maxi was lukewarm to the idea of being his subject, but warmed when she saw his collection of masks—a assortment of colorful faces—caught in various expressions and effervescent shades of tint—some hot and exciting, like the subjects and their personas, others more subdued, shadowed, or darkened. Vince had done her casting about two weeks ago. The thing lay on his worktable at his studio, yet remained untouched. He had sketched out a number of color schemes for her, to match her moods and facial makeup. But his work and travel schedule had precluded him from spending any real time on completing it. With the sudden turn of events—he wanted and needed to bring closure to this piece. One thing about Vince—he was constantly sketching out new designs and seemingly wanting to move on, but he hated to begin a new project until the others were completed. And now, as he sat in *Cosi* sipping his coffee, he thought about Maxi and the plaster cast sitting on his worktable surrounded by newsprint, and resigned himself to bring this part of his life to completion. Finish it, he told himself, and then mount it with the others—a collection of faces, many past lovers, those, he was sorry to say, who took *his* test, and had failed...

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THE SOUND OF the door opening caused Vince to glance up. He had been deep in thought for God knows how long—perhaps thirty minutes or longer. His pad lay on his lap—a woman’s face, neck, and shoulder’s coming to life—the woman from his dream—Trey’s woman—Vince attempting to capture those eyes, the look that spoke to him—the one that reached right under his skin, tugged at his insides until it reached the inner sanctum of his heart, and pulled on his heartstrings... Get it down on paper, if it was indeed possible, what was in his mind’s eye. Difficult—even now, for the image was fading from the confines of his mind, evaporating like misty tendrils of smoke which are exhaled, and drift off into the ether.

A tall, dark skinned woman stood at the counter—a shock of thick, black hair emerging from the back of her gray baseball cap. Dark blue sweat suit and Avia running shoes. She ordered; turned for a moment in his direction, looked to the far end of the bar—where Vince was the only patron left; the white couple had left over fifteen minutes ago—and then turned back. Got her coffee—a tall, steamy thing, and a bagel, and took a seat at a table across from the long counter. Vince noticed a University of Maryland tee shirt underneath as she unzipped her jacket and pulled it off, placing it on the bar stool across from her. Vince spotted her long, yet muscular arms—they weren’t overly big—but he could see that they were firm and without any traces of fat. She glanced in his direction for a moment, looked past him and then down to her bagel. Vince watched her as she began to

eat it, forgetting for a brief moment the pad that lay in his lap. The woman pulled off her cap, took the ponytail holder out of her hair and shook her head, letting her hair go wild before tying it back up. The woman had high cheekbones—they were edges to her cheeks, and Vince found himself staring at her—not out of disrespect, or because he thought she was overly beautiful—but because she had an interesting face, and it intrigued him from an artist’s point of view. He glanced down at his pad, flipped to a fresh new page, and quickly began to sketch the outline of her face, a dark face with well-defined angles to it—distinct lines that cut from the V in her chin to the edge of each cheek. Vince became mesmerized by the symmetry, the geometry of her face, glanced up as he drew—trying to capture and put on paper a vein of an idea that had formed in his mind...

She caught him staring. It was one of those awkward moments when a woman senses someone looking at her and glances up to find someone staring back. At that moment, Vince had been paused from what he was doing, mechanical pencil hovering over the coarse paper, staring at her chin, focusing on it and its lovely curves. Then onto her eyes, which in direct opposition to her strong facial lines were soft, oval orbs that shined when she paused from eating, and wiped away a crumb that had stuck on the edge of her lip. Yet, Vince wasn’t smiling—he missed the opportunity for that fleeting connection—that microsecond of dead space—silence—before two people, whose eyes had locked, turn away. For Vince, his mind was on a different plane—he was studying her, the way a scientist researches a particular subject—no, that wasn’t quite right—in this case, that clinical detachment was missing—he was intrigued—and quite interested—but his intentions were about to be misunderstood.

The woman glanced down at her food and continued eating. She was reading something, Vince couldn’t tell what—she sipped at her coffee—letting small, mouthfuls of the hot liquid go down her throat with a single gulp. She was young. Vince put her in her early twenties—twenty-three at the most. She, obviously, was in good shape. He could tell from the way she sat, her fit and trim arms, the lines of her neck—he hadn’t paid much attention to that before, but now as he looked closer he could see. Yes, she had wonderful lines in her neck—those ropy muscles and tight skin—sinewy, that’s the word that came to mind as he stared at her neck—the way those lines plunged downward, toward her breasts—his eyes descended, following the lines, observing the rise of flesh, her breasts, pausing for a moment, watching with a sort of clinical detachment, then moving down again to her stomach and waist. She glanced up again, caught him staring for the second time—her stare remained—longer this time than the last. Vince, his mind in artist mode—mind racing, thinking of the possibilities here, yet once again on a different level than hers. Vince smiled at the woman—but her facial expression did not change. She shook her head—it was every so slight, and then she went back to her eating and reading.

Vince glanced down at the sketch on his lap. It was crude—in no way, shape, or form would anyone think this was a “good” sketch, but it wasn’t meant to be—Vince was capturing ideas—the lines and symmetry of her face—chin and cheeks—the yin and yang between her lines and those soft, oval eyes—wondering all the while how to imprison all of this in plaster—confine it forever in the construct of a colorful mask. His mind sprinted with the possibilities—like a fresh water stream that rushes over slippery rocks—yes, he could use color here and splashes of hue there—he pointed to the sketch, and made a few impromptu notes. And then suddenly, he was rising from the couch as he finished the last of his still warm coffee in one gulp, slung the sketchpad to the table, and walked over.

She glanced up as he stopped in front of her table. Vince was smiling.

“Hello,” he began, “I don’t mean to bother you, but I’ve been sitting over there—” he gestured to the couch, “and I just wanted to say hello.” He paused for a split second and then stuck out his hand. “I’m Vince Cannon, Jr.” The woman watched him silently. Her eyes

broke away from Vince's stare and glanced at his dangling hand. She let it hang there for a moment before speaking.

"I noticed you staring. Didn't your mother tell you it isn't polite to stare?" There was no trace of a smile on her face, nor a warming to her voice.

"Yes, she did, as a matter of fact." His hand rose a few degrees; he tipped his head to the side a bit and smiled, letting her see all of his perfectly straight white teeth. "So, touché! Now, are you going to sit there and not show this brutha any love?? Gonna just let my hand wave here in the breeze? That is definitely not right, is it?" He laughed. That got her to soften up just a bit.

"I'm Desiree." She placed her palm in his and they shook.

"Desiree. That is a lovely name. I apologize for staring. It's just that you have a very interesting face. Has anyone every told you—you have wonderful lines?" Vince crossed his arms to his chest. Desiree cocked her head to side.

"Wonderful lines? I'm not following." She put her coffee down and gave him her full attention.

"Yes, wonderful lines. Your face is very angular. I find that very distinctive—not something you see every day. The symmetry of your face is *intriguing*."

"Intriguing?" Desiree asked.

"Yes. And then there are your eyes—which are in direct contrast to your hard lines—I don't mean hard in a "bad" way. On the contrary—and your eyes have a very soft, almost dreamlike quality to them. Very distinctive."

Desiree stared up at Vince, watched him for a moment while she said nothing. She nodded slowly.

"Thank you."

"May I join you?"

"Listen, Vince," Desiree said touching her ponytail, "you seem like a nice guy and all, but here's the thing. It's Sunday—I'm sitting here chilling, enjoying the peace and quiet of the morning, not trying to get into anything with anybody and—"

Vince cut her off with a wave of his hand. "Oh, let me stop you right there—I'm not trying to pick you up or get your number. Actually, I'm an artist—what I am interested in doing is getting you to pose—"

"Listen, Vince," Desiree said again, "can I keep it real with you?" Before Vince could answer she continued. He dropped his arms to his side and exhaled slowly. He could already see where this was leading. "See, this is what I never will understand—bruthas and their wack-ass pick up lines. I mean—" and here she began to raise her voice. Lisa, leaning behind the counter was watching her silently like a hawk. "I don't get it. How come bruthas can't come up with anything *original*. Damn! You know how many times this week *alone* some dude has offered to take my picture, hook me up with a portfolio, or make me a star! Damn, you bruthas need to get some original lines before you step to a sistah!"

Vince had listened to her without comment. He stood still, letting her say her piece. He was calm—no reason not to be.

"Obviously, you have the wrong impression about me, but that's cool. I was not trying—" Vince paused then sighed. "You know what?" He shook his head forlornly. "Desiree, have yourself a very nice day. Sorry to have disturbed you."

He turned on his heels and went back to his couch. He picked up his sketchpad in one fluid motion—didn't even pause in mid-stride as he grabbed it, and exited out the side door. Desiree was watching him silently. She finished the last of her coffee, scrunched up her cup and got up to walk to the trashcan, shaking her head. Lisa observed her, elbows on the

counter, a women's magazine splayed in front of her. Desiree passed her by, paused, and then turned.

"Tell me something, sistah," she said to Lisa. "Are you feeling me on these wack-ass niggas who don't got no game?" Lisa nodded sullenly. "I mean, I got nothing against a good looking brutha who can converse, but if he don't have no rap, don't even waste my time!"

"I hear you," was all Lisa said in response.

"Listen, I'm not trying to disrespect these bruthas out here. But, damn, do you have to use the same ole tired-ass lines? 'Oh, baby, let me take your picture—you know you look like a model?—let me hook you up with my cousin, he's a director for MTV. For real.' Damn! All I want to do is come in here, get my coffee, sit here and chill, relax, not deal with that bullshit, you know?"

Lisa backed up from the counter, closed her magazine, and eyed Desiree carefully.

"I do hear you, my sistah, and it's none of my business, but you did come on kind of strong with my man there," she said gesturing to the side door. Beyond the glass, Vince had finished donning his gloves, goggles, and helmet, and was firing up his Harley. The two watched him in silence for a moment.

"Please, he's just as tired as the next...nice looking and all, sexy smile, but please! Get some brand new lines!" Desiree grabbed the remains of her half-eaten bagel and tossed it in the trash. She donned her jacket—zipped it up and turned to leave.

"Like I said, none of my business," Lisa said in Desiree's direction, "but you might want to take a look at that over there," she said, pointing toward the far wall by the door. Desiree's eyes followed, stopping at a piece of art hanging on the wall. It was a mask set in the middle of an off-white canvas, with a thick, black lacquered border—with vibrant splotches of paint adorning the face—red, orange, green and blue spots that covered the surface—underneath, a reddish, brown stain that seeped below the surface and gave it a phantom-like sheen. The expression was one of joy—the lips were upturned, and accentuated—the eyes—although holes, burned bright with touches of brilliant acrylic paint—an eyeliner of sorts that rimmed the orbs and brought the mask to life. Desiree stared in silence—gathered her stuff and without breaking her stare, moved toward the piece. The beauty of the mask drew her in—its raw, surreal quality was poignant. In the distance, Vince gunned the throttle, let in the clutch and rode away, the low growl from his engine suspended, like particles, in the morning air.

Lisa let Desiree get within six feet before speaking: "A moving and very powerful piece, wouldn't you say?" She eyed Desiree, who's entire demeanor had changed. "He calls that one, 'My Secret Redeemer'."

"Who?" Desiree asked even though her body shivered with the recognition of the answer, which loomed directly in front of her own face.

"The brutha who just walked out of here—the brutha with the tired-ass lines." Lisa eyed her for a moment more and then turned toward the back, leaving Desiree to stand in front of the mask, and contemplate its meaning, and its maker, alone...

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ONE WOULD THINK that after a workout like the one just experienced with the lovely Gabrielle, I'd be spent! But for some reason, I felt completely revitalized—as if someone had injected me with a shot of adrenaline, instead of the other way around. I went back to my room, showered, to get that fuck-smell out of my pores, buzzed my head again (gotta keep the dome clean, ya know?), splashed on some more cologne, massaged a fair amount of

lotion into my skin so that my shit would be *aglow*, then decided on what I was going to wear. The toga party was still in effect, however, my toga was sand-filled and nasty, the sheet having been used to wipe the cum off of Gabrielle's pretty face and body. So, I searched through my closet for half hour (like a girl) trying on this and that, just not being satisfied, until I decided on a simple outfit to blaze. I chose my stone blue shorts as the foundation, and then turned my attention to a shirt. That took even longer—I mean, I went through six or seven different ones before I just said, “fuck it!” and left my shit bare. Kept the top button to my shorts unbuttoned—kind of like inviting the honeys in without actually doing so—slipped on my brown sandals, the Breitling Blackbird, my silver necklace and bracelet set, a sharp pinky ring, and headed on out. It was still early and I planned on getting into some *more* fun before midnight!

I waltzed into the toga party feeling like a king. I mean, things were going so wonderfully well for me, I couldn't believe it. I felt so revitalized—really good sex always did that to me—like cleaning out the system, one felt completely refreshed and rejuvenated. I had come *hard* with Gabrielle, my favorite way to come, and my dick and balls still carried that totally spent feeling that would stay with me for hours. I was feeling good, on top of the world. And my first full day hadn't even come to an end yet!

A bunch of toga partiers were sandwiched together on the small dance floor while reggae music blasted out of ceiling hung speakers. As soon as I walked in, the crowd spotted me (how could they not—I was one of the only mutha fuckas in there *not* wearing a toga)! A few rowdy partygoers started yelling and screaming, pointing my way—in seconds the entire crowd was cheering me. There was a small stage up front—the D.J. had positioned his equipment off to one side—when he saw me, he grabbed his mike and moved to center stage while calling for me to join him. I was playing it off at first, just standing back, smiling and waving to the crowd, my gleaming chest heaving from the play I was getting, my arms shining and flexing, tattoos looking good against well-tanned skin. But then I thought to myself, I'm the star of this show, so why delay any further—and so I rolled onto center stage. The roar became louder, almost deafening as I moved to the middle. Bitches were clocking me as I went—I waved to the moving, sweaty throng, grinned at Randy who was raising his fist into the air screaming my name—“TREY, TREY, TREY, TREY, TREY!” People were being worked into a frenzy. And I was not mad at any of them!

I reached for the mike and gestured for the crowd to chill. The sound fell quiet on my cue.

“Yeah...y'all...” I said, all Barry White-like, dropping my voice down several notches in pitch—the crowd went wild again. Again, I gestured for quiet and they responded.

“I'd like to thank God and the Academy...” Laughter erupted as I grinned and nodded silently to the toga-clad pack. A few women showed me their tits. I winked and licked my lips to each one in turn.

“But most of all...let me thank my co-star,” I put a hand to my forehead to search the crowd, “where the fuck's she at?” A pause. “Y'all seen my CO-STAR?” My voice rose to a crescendo as I completed the sentence. Mutha fuckas were pointing to Gabrielle who was seated with Raul and another couple about mid-way from the stage on the right. I grinned, pointed to her and told her to get up. Reluctantly she stood and curtsied for the crowd. Gabrielle remained standing for a moment more while applause erupted around her. She threw me a kiss. The mob then went wild as I raised my fist in triumph, the heavy reggae beat began to rise, and I turned to exit the stage gracefully, like the star that I truly am!

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THAT'S WHEN I spotted her. And literally, in the time that it takes to blink, the blood drained from my face. Far back, but unmistakable among the toga-clad revelers—she stood there, distinct from others by her short dress—orange, low cut, and hugging her sensuous curves like a tight, leather glove. But it was the high cheekbones, distinctive even from where I stood, frozen in mid-stride—and her long hair, perfectly straight and jet black, running halfway down her back like that of a model—that caused my heart to miss a beat and jaw to drop like a stone. I knew I looked ridiculous up there on stage—the entire *congregation* watching my every move, the pain that formed at the top of my baldhead and flowed like an avalanche down my face, neck, shoulders, and chest—and onto my firm legs that suddenly felt like jello and began to tremble as such.

My knees buckled; I faltered and began to sway—the D.J., thankfully sensing something was terribly wrong, reached out with his dark arm to right me—and I took refuge in his grip, flashed a fake smile, trying to play it off. Some might have assumed it was the booze taking control—that being the norm at a party like this, but the vast majority of the crowd knew something was indeed wrong. It was the look—I could see it on their faces—their smile wavered, laughs and catcalls waned as their eyes locked on mine, everyone in the room trying to comprehend the shift, the sudden drop in temperature. Our eyes locked for a moment, hers and mine—and like flipping a switch, the pain appeared: severe and concentrated in my heart, like a knife, which is thrust into flesh and twisted in a sinister, gruesome way, ensuring maximum collateral damage. My throat constricted, I felt the air being extinguished, the lights dimming, fading fast, and for the first time in a long while I was *scared*, utterly terrified; my heart was thumping, reverberating in my ears so fucking loud I swore every partygoer in the place could *hear* my pulse. So many thoughts and images invaded my brain in that split second—like a movie jammed on fast-forward—they flashed by, details blurring as they raced by—and yet, I knew what I was seeing. And then the *realization* hit me like a crisp slap to the cheek—was this my punishment for living large on a cloud too high, consuming way too much, more than my slice? Down here for less than 36 hours and living *dreams* that only a fraction of us ever get to realize—who the fuck did I think I was—was that it? Was this God's way of letting me know I had gone too far—pushing me back down, and into place?

And then the wave passed—as quickly as it had surfaced—with the sudden awareness that the object of this unexpected ache was a delusion, like a desert mirage—it was not *her*. The pain dissipated into thin air, like tendrils of Cuban smoke—I was breathing once again, vision clear and focused, legs working as advertised—I displayed a smile to the crowd, once again raised my fist in a puny attempt to correct any misconception that had begun to form—this was *still* Trey's house, wasn't gonna let mutha fuckas think even for one quick second that it wasn't—these bitches were still sweating me like I was going out of style—yeah, in the blink of an eye, I was back—okay, sixty percent and rising—batteries recharging...

I found myself at the bar, a steady stream of fans stopping by to high-five me and say, "Waz up!" At this point, every mutha fucka in the spot knew my name. But I wasn't basking in the *glow* of the limelight. No. I stood there anxiously, wiping away the sweat that had formed on my smooth dome, ordered a drink after a few minutes of indecisiveness—finally deciding on a Bob Marley, and told the bartender to light that mutha fucka up if he dared—cause at this stage Trey needed *anything* with strong liquor in it. The bartender placed the shot in front of me and stroked his lighter—I sucked heartily at the straw, oblivious to the blue flame, and motioned for another. Out of my periphery I could see Randy and Cathy making their way over to the bar—Randy's boisterous voice leading the way—hand on my shoulder—"Dude, everyting irie? You look like you've seen a ghost!" I flashed another fake smile, grabbed the second shot before the Jamaican could reach for his lighter, and downed it, splashing some on my cheek.

“Naw, I’m fine...” I elbowed my way out of the bar crowd that was getting thick and annoying. I needed space and fresh air to breathe. Randy had this funny look on his face; I was putting distance between the two of us, but Cathy reached for him as he tried to go after me. I turned to him and gestured for him to stay. “Everyting irie, mon,” I said, flashing a weak smile. “Trey back in control...True dat!

Randy stopped and nodded. He seemed to believe it. I turned to leave. The question was, did I?

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BACK IN MY room, I splashed cold water on my face and tried to think—and will myself to calm down. This was out of character for me, and that’s what really bothered me. The fact that my mind was on a separate path, not going with the flow—not with the damn program. That wasn’t right, but nothing I could do would change the way I felt. And so, I stood in front of the mirror—stared at the image that reflected back. Took deep breaths. Patted my face with a towel and pushed the thoughts that were welling up inside of me away, like an annoying child.

A knock at the door broke my spell. I froze—listened to the sounds—movement on the other side of the wall, white noise and other distractions that made it hard to focus—but Randy’s voice was unmistakable, cutting through the air like a knife. I made my way to the door, knowing with certainty that he was not going away.

“Dude, open up! Someone here to meet you!” Banging, incessant knocking—and that deafening/raunchy voice that I had come to know—now the last thing I wanted to hear. I paused at the door, taking a deep breath, wiping my head with my hand as if that would somehow transform my appearance.

When the door opened I found myself face to face with *her*—orange dress no more than twenty-four inches away, smiling, her perfectly white teeth shining as her eyes sparkled, lighting up the darkness. She was gorgeous, no, that didn’t even do her justice—her beauty, and in particular, her sensuality, was unparalleled—high, sculpted cheekbones; perfectly shaped nose; bright, unwavering eyes; dark, unfathomable hair; long, curved eyelashes; perfect breasts that peaked out from the confines of her dress...

“Trey, mon, this fine young lady was inquiring about the star of the show! Hope you don’t mind my man, know you wouldn’t...” Randy was interrupted when she stepped forward, invading the narrow space between the doorframe and where I stood, thrusting a hand forward—I had no choice but to take it—electrons flying between us as our hands touched, I could feel the electricity surge, and under any other circumstances my whole aura would be glistening and shimmering, yet I could feel the temperature dropping again.

“I’m Cinnamon, undoubtedly your biggest fan!” She flaunted another smile—meanwhile Randy stepped up, a few drinks under his belt/toga, and feeling no pain.

“I’m sure you are, baby; all sugar and spice!” he replied, wrapping a tattooed hand around her lovely waist.

“...And,” she said, eyes blinking, waving Randy’s comment off like it was an annoying insect, “I just wanted to say how much I enjoyed your show.”

I stood there, taking this all in, mind spinning, the normal Trey-comebacks being plucked from the far recesses of my crammed databanks and compiled, but at half-speed, way too fucking slowly. Randy, sensing my discomfort, stepped in, taking control.

“Trey, meet Cinnamon. Cinnamon, this is Trey. Mon, Cinnamon’s visiting—only here for this one night—and guess what? She’s heard about our nightly hot tub party—said she’s definitely game, but only if *you* join the party tonight...” Randy was grinning ear-to-ear as if

he had just delivered news that would save the nation. Cinnamon made no move to back up—her eyes sweeping over my bare chest and arms, taking in the tattoos, my unbuttoned shorts and tanned legs that gleamed under the night-lights. Cathy standing behind her, locked her eyes on Cinnamon's scrumptious ass, licking her rouge-touched lips, and undoubtedly thinking of the possibilities here...

"Give me a minute," I said finally, delivering the best that I could do under the circumstances. The pain was there, just under the surface, like a jellyfish—its long, perilous tentacles paralyzing every living thing in its path—"I just need to *freshen up*." Randy cocked his head to the side, pursed his lips as if this notion didn't compute. "Need just a minute...is that cool?" I asked, smiling at Cinnamon. As an afterthought, I reached out to stroke her forearm, as if this would add some sense of potency to my words.

"Oh yeah, that's way cool with me, Trey," she answered. Under any other circumstances, I swear to God, I would *deposit* my tongue down the throat of this goddess-bitch—this was a no brainer; the woman was sweating me; them panties were *soaked*, that much was obvious, I had already won the prize. And yet, just reaching out to touch her had left my right arm feeling beaten and bruised. I smiled regardless, shielding my trepidation, closed the door slowly as Randy, Cathy, and our new companion, Cinnamon, withdrew to the hot tub and the prospects of another made-in-heaven connection.

I could hear their retreat: their laughter and footfalls echoing in my ears long after they had left. With the lights extinguished, as if that would somehow shelter me from harms way, I slid down the whitewashed wall, gradually to the bare, cold floor. At some point I fell asleep, my figure remaining in that spot—not moving, harried breathing, until this new anxious self—one that I hadn't seen in a long, long time—met the new dawn...

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ANGELIQUE' WAS NOT about to waste any more time. She went to her altar, lit the candles and incense, returned to the couch where Vince had chosen to sit, lit those on the coffee table as well and extinguished the light. Warm air swirled in through an open window, causing the flames to flicker. Angelique' silently handed Vince a wine stem, went to her worktable, grabbed her brushes and paints, and returned to the center of her studio where hours earlier she had worked on Amber. Shadows of her lovely form wavered on the surrounding walls.

"Take off your jacket and sweater," she commanded. Vince stood, removed his jacket and placed it on the ends of the couch. She watched as he took off his sweater, noticing the well-developed muscles of his stomach and upper body. He started for her but she spoke—"Come to think of it, take off your pants too. We certainly don't want to mess up a perfectly good suit, now do we?" Her eyes had closed to mere slits, but Vince could still see the twinkle in her stare as she kneeled on the rug. He obeyed—came to her, the fabric of his black boxers pulled taut. His heart was fluttering. She reached for him, pulled him down onto the carpet and began adorning his chest with color.

At first, she used light delicate strokes, and then she abandoned her craft, deliberately cutting wide, uneven swaths across his neck, nipples, and stomach. Vince laughed, grabbed his wine stem and took a healthy swig; the amber-colored liquid spilled and meandered down his bearded chin to his chest. It mixed with the still-wet paint. Angelique' laughed. She pulled the wine away from him and took a wild swig. Vince reached for her blouse and pulled upwards—her arms raised without indecision and it came off. Underneath, she was braless. Next the belt and pants were removed. She was still painting him, applying red, brown, and orange paint onto his legs and thighs, the thick brush sweeping past his boxers, lingering for a

few moments so that she could feel his flesh. He grabbed the brush from her hand, dipped the tip in red wet paint and applied a swath to her swaying breasts. She giggled and he repeated the movement again, applying circles until her entire upper body was covered.

Angelique´ began to wrestle him, attempting to pry the brush from his grasp. Vince was far more powerful, and won easily, although Angelique´ didn't give up without a fight. He directed the brush to her lower region, painting a wide path from one thigh to her knee. She had her head back and was laughing; suddenly she kicked out at him as he reached behind her and felt her ass. Vince maneuvered over her, and she reclined into a prone position; he placed the freshly dipped brush between his teeth and ran it across her neck, shoulders, and chin. Simultaneously, and without warning, he grasped each end of her g-string between his fingers. Her eyes widened briefly as she felt the fabric moving down her legs. And then she was naked, frowning because he was still covered. She thrashed out, attempting to reach for him, but Vince was too quick, squirming out of her reach. During the lull in the excitement, Angelique´ grabbed a bit of blue paint with her fingers, tricked him into coming near her—not that he needed coaxing—smearred it over his back and ass, before catching the rim of his boxers with her cupped hand and yanking *hard*. The boxers came off, Vince yelping as they tore down his legs and ankles.

And then Angelique´ was on him in a flash, her body moving like that of a cat, firm breasts hovering over his chest, her hair in her face and his, Vince's hands reaching for her, feeling the ripened mounds of flesh and squeezing, twirling fingers about her nipples, and consuming her mouth with his. Angelique´ savored the feeling of their mouths and bodies pressed together as one, the current that surged from her insides, pushing outward until she felt as if she were about to burst. They tasted each other, no holds barred, giving into their desires, exploring each other with their mouths, tongues, hands, and fingers. Vince moaned under Angelique´, his sex fully engorged and feeling as if he was ready to explode from the passion and excitement. Her thighs rubbed against his, her hips seductively rotating against his muscular legs, the heat between hers overpowering. Vince closed his eyes, desperately wanting to ensure that this was no delusion. Before he could open his eyes, Angelique´ impaled herself with Vince's hardness—riding him bareback, Vince a beautiful, black stallion, her legs splayed wide across his wonderful, decorated body, gripping the reins of his flesh, her head back, eyes shut, skin dripping with acrylic color and blending with their sweat as the candle flames flickered and fluttered, and Vince and Angelique´ gave in to their fervor...

They made love, intensely and passionately, the way true lovers do. Vince shut his eyes and concentrated on *feeling* Angelique´, every nerve tip alive and dripping with sensitivity. His entire being seemed to be swallowed up by her, she riding him slowly, enjoying every delicious inch of his manhood, Vince smiling as her pelvis ground against his, and his arms reached around to hold her, feel her delicate flesh as his fingers glided across her paint-covered skin.

"My God, you feel so incredible!" Vince managed to say in between lunges of his hips. She smiled, then giggled, reached for the paint tray, swiped at the pile of bright orange paint with her fingers, and smearred it all over his chest, circling his nipples. As she continued to squirm against him, her hand snaked down his stomach to where they joined, and on her upstroke, she grasped hold of his member, wrapped her hand solidly around him and decorated it with the paint, before plunging back down on his stiffness. Vince grinned as she coated him with the sticky dye, reaching for her taut nipples as she threw her head back and laughed. Then she tilted to the side and they came undone, Vince following her lead, scooping her up in his powerful arms and laying her gently underneath him. She glanced down, wanted to witness him in all of his glory. She touched him, wrapped her hand around his penis again, and felt his pulse as she guided him back into her wetness.

“Oh, YES!” Angelique´ shouted, her voice rising in pitch as he slipped into her, his forearms resting near hers as he bent down and kissed her lips. Then his muscles flexed as he pushed up and moved arms length from her, his hips and ass below a frenzied array of movement as he unleashed his vigor in her. Angelique´ thrashed underneath him, her sweaty hips and thighs a blur of activity in response to his thrusts. She reached for his face, tugged at his closely cropped beard that she found so damn sexy, and gripped the back of his head as she watched him make love to her, the exquisite feeling of him alternately filling then draining her, so intense and overshadowing, that she felt herself flush. And then Vince paused, pressed his body against hers, the sticky pigment from his chest, stomach, and legs mingling with hers. They remained this way, quiet and frozen, the only sound coming from their harried breathing, each feeling the other’s heartbeat, powerful and strong, as they listened to the wind as it rustled in from the open window.

Vince came off Angelique´, knelt before her and let his gaze sweep from her tousled hair to her painted toes. How lovely she was! He reached for her, turned her over gingerly until she was on her stomach, her lovely ass rising like a crescent shaped moon above the now sticky carpet. He scooped up a handful of red paint from the tray, and silently lathered up her thighs, ass, and lower back until a solid coat of paint was evident. Angelique´ turned her head to the side and laid it in her hands while she watched him work his art. When he had smoothed out the coat of paint, smeared it around her flesh and massaged it in to her skin with his fingers, he reached for the bright blue acrylic, scooped up a small mound and applied a wide swath in a circle around her ass. Next, he grabbed some green paint and did the same, drawing a smaller, inner circle, closer to her canal. Lastly, he reached for the black paint, measured out two-fingers worth as Angelique´ moaned and spread her legs sensuously for him. With the candles flickering in the background creating dancing shadows on the walls, Vince smeared the black coloring over and around her sex, the tips of his fingers gliding in between the slippery folds of her molten core. He sat back finally, admired his handiwork, as Angelique´ lay there panting, a bulls-eye on her lovely, fine ass. Vince smiled a wicked grin, before guiding himself back inside of her.

He thrust against her decorated ass with abandonment, the passion within both of them riding high until it crested like a giant tidal wave—and they cried out, in tandem, consuming each other until there was nothing left to give, the passion wrung out, spent—the relief oozing out from pores and orifices like sap from a tree. And Angelique´ lifted her head slowly, turned toward her altar of burning candles and incense, recited a quick prayer of thanks to the love goddess of voodoo before closing her eyes and losing herself in this ecstasy of this man named Vince...

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THEY HAD FINISHED up at *bluespace* by ten and left to run home and change. Trey and Vince swung by Erika’s place in Silver Spring, and together they rode down 16<sup>th</sup> Street to the waterfront, like wingmen from a fighter squadron. The night was perfect for riding—the temperature had not yet begun to dip into winter zone.

It was after eleven by the time they roared up Maine to *Zanzibar On The Waterfront*. Insisting they make a grand entrance to the club, as only they could do, Trey rode point on the Indian, decked out in soft brown leather from jacket to boot, Erika gripping his waist, adorned in a pair of tight jeans, black leather jacket and boots, her hair swept back by a faded yellow bandanna underneath her helmet. Vince held the rear on the Fat Boy, shaking his head as Trey weaved in and out of downtown traffic, the stars shimmering and shinning overhead as they rode.

By the time they had arrived, a crowd had formed on the sidewalk in front of *Zanzibar*, a rare sight for a Wednesday night. But Erika had remembered from listening to Donnie Simpson, the green eyed bandit on WPGC earlier that day that someone famous—she just couldn't recall who exactly—was gonna be there for some kind of reggae after party.

Trey downshifted, gunned the throttle for show, making a few women jump from the sharp rapport, smirked behind his shades, and turned toward the sidewalk. All eyes were on them as he dropped his boots to the ground—and this was the part that excited Trey and Vince the most—when folks stopped in mid-conversation as they rode by—wondering just who those wild boys were—decked out in their leather, fly shades on, sexy, rumbling, hot chrome between their legs. Trey steered his machine past the now silent crowd that had parted to let them through, up under the awning where they came to rest, all eyes upon them. Normally, this space was off limits for any kind of parking, since it was directly in front of the club's front entrance. But Trey knew the owner fairly well, and had been here with the Indian and the Fat Boy too many times to count—so the bouncers became familiar with their motorcycles, and allowed them to park there. Plus, it was good for business. The owner knew from experience that folks loved to gawk at those two machines. They always attracted a crowd.

Erika dismounted first, taking Trey's hand to maintain balance as she swung her leg over the Corbin seat. Once both feet were back on solid ground, she smoothed out her jeans and removed her helmet, retying her bandanna tightly behind her. Trey and Vince also wore bandanas over their heads, and looked sexy as hell, she had to admit. Trey waved to a few acquaintances as he stowed his gloves and set the disc-lock. He then walked over to the bouncer who had let them through, hugged him briefly and slapped his back as he palmed a fifty into his hand. The brutha pocketed the bill and touched Trey fist-to-fist. Erika just had to smile. She had to give her boy credit; he knew how to work it, no question about that.

In the few moments that it took to waltz into the club—there was a line, but Erika and company damn sure weren't about to wait to get into this place—she surveyed the crowd and had to smile. It never ceased to amaze her; she thought to herself while scanning the mostly dark faces—a source of much discussion between Vince, Trey, and herself—how women always had the same look on their faces when they spotted guys on their bikes. What was it about being a roughneck, possessing that living on the edge wild-streak that drove women crazy? It was funny—most women talked non-stop about wanting an educated, well-dressed man. Hell, they all knew that from personal experience, especially Trey—his ass worked downtown, he knew! Just waltz around 7<sup>th</sup> Street, F Street, or K Street (Lawd, have mercy!) at lunchtime, shaded and Brooks Brothers-down, and watch the women as they stare at his fine ass! Them ladies loved them some well-dressed niggas! No doubt! But then, let Trey or Vince sport a leather jacket and pants, bandanna and shades, face unshaven, and come roaring by—oh, hell no, and sistas would just about lose their mind! It was that sense of excitement mixed with danger—it could be seen in their eyes—

“Oh, I see, you ain't just any ole nine-to-five man, you *ride*?”

“Oh, hell yeah, shorty, I live to ride...”

“Hmmm...I've *always* wanted to get on the back of a bike...”

“Baby, I'd just love to get you on the back of one right now! Girl, you just don't know...”

Erika grasped both Trey's and Vince's hand—the three of them loved to do this when they went out—kept folks guessing just who Erika was with—this one...or that one—or was that fine sista with them both??? Dayum!

They waltzed into the club that served up Caribbean-inspired food and the best music Chocolate City had to offer (that is if you dug *anything* besides hip-hop and rap), up the winding stairs to the second floor, past the large dance floor, and raised upper level area to

the back VIP section and bar. Past hundreds of patrons who were sweating and grooving to the funk'n', throbbin' sounds of the D.J., who had Cameo on the box—"Single Life," it's bass thump slapping against their chests like heavy heartbeats, Trey grabbed Erika's hand and pulled her into the sea of bodies while belting out, "I'm living a single, single...life..." Folks parting around them like a waterfall surrounds suntanned flesh, watching them closely, wondering, who in the fuck was this leather-clad couple, colorful bandanna-down, painted on jeans (fellas, Erika was working them Guess jeans!) while everyone else was dressed conservatively—as Erika and Trey moved to the rhythm as if tethered, yeah, they moved *that* well—her thigh slipping in between his legs as his arms wrapped around her thin waist, head thrown back, eyes closed, fingers and hands reaching toward to the ceiling; Vince pulling in behind her into *his* slot, as if on cue—now mutha fuckas were really losing their minds—watching him slap against her ass with his pelvis as if he were fucking her right on this very dance floor, his hands on her hips as the three of them fell into their own sync-groove, like pistons on a well-oiled engine—the trio making a writhing sandwich, Erika being the *meat*, one hell of a sight—everyone in the club straining their necks to get a glimpse...

And then the music shifted, D.C.'s own Me'Shell Ndege'Ocello, "*If That's Your Boyfriend (He Wasn't Last Night)*," her sultry, sexy voice rapping over a bass-infused jam—

"...You're upset cause you're one stuck-up bitch/maybe he needed a change/a switch/and who am I not to oblige/especially if the man is fly/so call me what you like/call me what you like/while I boot slam your boyfriend tonight..."

Folks who were tiring and beginning their exit from the dance floor turned in mid-stream as they recognized the song, "that there's my jam!" The floor filled again quickly, as Trey, Vince, and Erika disengaged and moved over to the VIP bar overlooking the harbor. The bouncer shook Trey and Vince's hand in turn before turning his hooded eyes toward Erika. They sparkled briefly as he looked her over. She was used to that and didn't pay him any mind. He waved them past him and they took a seat at the bar, Erika between them, and ordered drinks from a Rasta bartender.

It was late, they all had to work in the morning, but there was still much more to discuss—Trey had just begun to touch on the newly unfolding drama at work, and Erika hadn't even shared any of her stuff yet—that was just like them too—usually, Trey and/or Vince spent most of the time consuming their precious *bluespace*-time reveling over their own exploits, rarely leaving enough time for her—actually, that was okay with her—she didn't possess the same need as they did to spill her guts and glory all over the table...but still...once in a while...damn...and as it turned out she actually had something of her own to share this time...

When their drinks arrived they toasted each other, and Erika glanced around. The VIP section wasn't crowded—just a few well-dressed folks lounging on couches behind them and a few seats at the bar taken up by well-dressed women. Erika smiled at them while watching Trey and Vince from the corner of her eyes. Vince, to her left was chatting with the bartender about some reggae star who had just completed a set downstairs. Trey, on her right, was swiveling around on his bar stool, nodding silently to the women at the bar, while simultaneously checking out a group of women on couches off to the side. He had caught the eye of a particular white woman; Erika noticed that immediately—Trey was grinning his usual grin, showing all of his perfectly straight white teeth, and tipping his glass in her direction—Erika was surprised that he was still sitting in his chair when she felt a tap on her shoulder. She pivoted around and looked into the eyes of a familiar face. Without warning, she felt herself flush.

"Erika."

"James." Trey and Vince turned in unison and glanced up at the man who stood behind Erika. They stared at him, synapses in their respective heads firing rapidly—Trey's smile was replaced by a frown as he looked the brutha up and down—sharp, two-button, single breasted wool suit by Prada and leather lace ups, gotta give him credit—whoever this mutha fucka was, he sure knew how to dress! And then recognition exploded in front of him—Trey knew this guy—saw him on a regular basis—on television—the local news.

"How are you? You look great." James bent down and pecked Erika on her cheek. She smiled but wondered if her boys could sense her discomfort.

"James, these are my close friends Trey Alexander and Vince Cannon, Jr. James works for Channel Four here in town."

"Nice to meet you two," James remarked, sticking out his hand to Vince first, as if sensing that Trey might not take it. Vince smiled ever so slightly and dropped his hand quickly, as if he might catch a communicable disease from this guy. Trey made no move to shake James' hand; rather he just continued to stare into the brutha's eyes.

"Where you two know each other from?" Trey asked, his vision a laser point equidistant from James and Erika. James began to speak, but Erika raised her voice, signaling to James and everyone else within earshot that she was going to take this one.

"We met a few weeks ago at an embassy function that I attended recently—"

"Since when you attend embassy functions?" Vince had turned on his stool and was staring at Erika, boldly ignoring James who hovered closely behind her.

"Yeah, embassy functions? That's a new one on me," Trey quipped.

"Listen to you two—acting like my damn daddy!" Erika smiled and James laughed. He was the only one. "Anywho—we met, had a drink together, and got together a few times after that." She stared at Trey who was eyeing her curiously, and then over to Vince whose drink lay untouched beside his elbow.

"Got together a few times..." Trey repeated. He had cocked his head and was looking at James curiously.

"You have to excuse these two—we go way back and they tend to be a bit possessive—like I'm their little sister or something."

James swallowed involuntarily as he eyed Vince who was shifting in his bar seat. Vince placed his palms flat on the bar deck and used the opportunity to flex his large muscles. The moment was not lost on James.

"I understand." A pause followed by a short laugh.

"Do you?" Trey said, turning to face James fully. "I mean, we take Erika here very seriously. We don't let just anyone get close to her—I'm sure you know what I mean."

"Of course." James stepped back a bit as if to remove himself from within striking distance. He placed a hand inside of his pocket and shifted uneasily in his shoes. "Well, I'm going to leave you alone. It was nice seeing you, Erika. Give me a call—I'd like to take you out again, that is, if it's okay with your protectors here?" He smiled and backed away before either Vince or Trey could respond.

"Mutha fucka," Vince whispered. "Sassy," he said while following James with his stare, "you better come clean right now! What's the deal with you and James?"

"I was going to tell you guys when my turn finally came around."

"Whatever, trick! Don't play us like that," Trey exclaimed. "What? It just conveniently slipped your mind that you're dating the fucking anchor from Channel Four news? I think not!"

"Both of you need to take a sip of your drinks and chill. Damn, I have nothing to hide. And I was going to tell you tonight. But Vince here's falling for a voodoo priestess, and Trey—well, with all of your monkey sex-acts, it's extremely difficult to get a word in edgewise!"

“Don’t make me bitch slap you!” Trey exclaimed, but his eyes were softening. Erika took a breath. “K,” she said, “Here it goes...”